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Assessor repair

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Only in San Bernardino County would an assessor focused on professional duties be anything remarkable. But the new assessor offers what should be the standard mind-set for county officials: an emphasis on public service, and not political empire-building.

An assessor intent on fulfilling the public mission of the office can help rebuild trust in the integrity of the assessor's operations — a crucial step in the aftermath of a high-profile criminal investigation. And the change in attitude and approach is a relief to county residents tired of government scandals, and to the rank-and-file assessor's employees who no longer need fear embarrassment at the mention of their boss.

Much of the credit for that return to routine goes to Dennis Draeger, who has run the office since former Assessor Bill Postmus resigned in February. County supervisors officially appointed Draeger as assessor last month.

Draeger offers a welcome contrast to Postmus' style. The former assessor filled the top administrative jobs in the office with unqualified people, and packed his expanded executive staff with cronies who did political work on public time, according to the county grand jury and an independent county report. Authorities last month charged Postmus with nine felonies, including grand theft and misuse of public property. Four of Postmus' former employees also face criminal charges.

Not surprisingly, morale at the assessor's office has improved since Draeger took over. The political hacks are gone, and district attorney's investigators no longer show up to interview staffers. The assessor's employees now have a boss who understands what they do, and is more interested in the office he runs than in building a political kingdom.

Bringing professional management to the assessor's office, however, is not enough to reverse the county government's pattern of scandal and corruption. County officials need to change the political atmosphere Postmus exemplified, where officials treat government as a personal perk and view ethical standards as applicable only to others.

Still, replacing political self-interest with public service in the assessor's office is a good start. Putting public business first should be standard practice in county offices — even without the prompting of another scandal.